

Catholic schools join for choral festival

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Florida Catholic correspondent

MIAMI | The music took wildly different forms recently at St. Mary Cathedral — from the ardent chords of “Ave Verum Corpus” to thick harmonies of African music to the squeak of a toy mallet.

The occasion was the Miami Mixed Voice Choral Festival and Mass, featuring the voices of 300 students from eight Catholic middle and high schools in South Florida. With 16 pieces ranging from Gregorian chants to responsorial psalms to traditional African songs, the Feb. 25 Mass embraced centuries of Catholic musical heritage.

The students were among an estimated 3,000 children and youths scheduled for 15 such festivals around the U.S. this year, part of a movement called Pueri Cantores. The century-old organization aims to stimulate youthful interest in Church music, and to groom the youths for leadership as adults.

For Lee Gwozdz, festival conductor, the reasons were both simple and lofty. “I want them to experience a beautiful liturgy and great treasures of our Church, as well as contemporary music,” said Gwozdz, also president of the American Federation Pueri Cantores. “When they go back to their churches, they can continue the tradition.”

Singers at the festival came from the schools of All Saints, Cardinal Gibbons and St. Thomas Aquinas, all in Fort Lauderdale; Our Lady of Lourdes Academy and St. Mary Cathedral, both in Miami; and St. Bonaventure, Davie. Also, there were two schools



From left, Bear Tomsula, 9, Mary Sella, 10, and Vanessa Qumsieh, 9, of St. Joan of Arc Parish, Boca Raton, sing during the Mass celebrated by Archbishop Thomas Wenski Feb. 25 at St. Mary Cathedral. Catholic school and parish youth choirs in grades four-12 participated in the 2017 Miami Mixed Voice Choral Festival and Mass organized by the American Federation Pueri Cantoris. (PHOTOS BY MARLENE QUARONI | FC)

from the Diocese of Palm Beach: St. Joan of Arc, Boca Raton; and St. Ann, West Palm Beach.

That night, their audience was not only the community, but Archbishop Thomas Wenski, the Mass celebrant. But like his fellow singers, Mateo Vaquero-Morea was up to it. “I like to have other people singing with me — it’s inspirational,” said Mateo, a fifth-grader at St. Bonaventure. “And it’s a good experience to sing for the archbishop.”

Several choristers spoke gleefully of the festival as a “field trip,” but it was no walk in the park: It included six hours of rehearsal, with short breaks, before the concert in late afternoon. And they’d already rehearsed at their schools.

Among the 16 pieces were “Agnus Dei” from the Missa de Ange-

lis, “With a Voice of Singing” by Martin Shaw, and “Lift Up Your Heads” by William Mathias. The program even borrowed from Africa, with a traditional Zambian song titled “Bonse Aba.”

Like her fellow singers, ninth-grader Amanda Toledo of Our Lady of Lourdes Academy was up to it. “It’s fun, and everyone in the music community is accepting,” said Amanda, who just started chorus full time this academic year, and has already decided on a musical career. “Yes, there’s pressure to learn. But today, I’m together with my schoolmates.”

During rehearsal, Gwozdz bolstered his instruction with a grab bag of toys. He beat a squeaky plastic hammer to keep time. He tossed a Velcro ball against a circular mitt pad while telling how to make a note stick.

He expanded and contracted a Hoberman Mini Sphere, showing how the diaphragm affects breath control. He threw punches with a hand puppet, prompting the kids to sing shorter notes. The props were all from his own copyrighted Singing Fundamentals Kit.

St. Bonaventure School brought 42 of its 60 singers to this year’s event, music director Ysomar Granados said. “It’s a great way of sharing their faith with the choral community and the archdiocese,” she said. “This repertoire is challenging. And it’s rewarding to conquer that challenge.”

The singers’ skill and work ethic came as no surprise to Michael Olbash, the festival coordinator and board member of the American Federation Pueri Cantores.

“Children are attracted to beauty,” said Olbash, a conductor in the Archdiocese of Boston. “They understand things that are true and larger than themselves. They know how to have a good



Erick Crow, Cardinal Gibbons High School director of choral activities and drama, conducts the choir Feb. 25 during the 2017 Miami Mixed Voice Choral Festival and Mass at St. Mary Cathedral.

time. But when it’s time to work, they want to do quality things for the Lord.”

Gwozdz then separated the singers into sections — soprano, alto, tenor, bass — mixing them beyond their school identities. For Jonathan Franzese, a freshman at St. Thomas Aquinas High School, that was actually one of the best parts.

“You can appreciate different kinds of kids more and form bonds,” Jonathan said. “We’re competitors with Gibbons High School, but I’m friends with Gibbons students.”

Pueri Cantores broadens that group spirit every five years, when it holds an international gathering in Rome for the world-

wide movement. It’s meant to reinforce the uniting power of music, said Jan Schmidt, executive director of the American federation.

“They stand next to choirs from Rwanda, Latvia, Poland,” Schmidt said. “And they understand immediately the need for a universal music.”

The last such trip was late December 2015 and early January 2016, when South Florida youths joined more than 5,000 fellow singers in Rome for the 40th international congress of Pueri Cantores. Among the events was a papal Mass at St. Peter’s Basilica, a lifetime memory for many of the children. ■

TRAINING TODAY’S SINGERS, TOMORROW’S LEADERS

MIAMI | The Feb. 25 Miami festival at St. Mary Cathedral was the first of 15 scheduled by Pueri Cantores around the U.S. — from Los Angeles to Chicago to Houston to New York. The only other Florida site this year will be Sts. Peter and Paul Parish in Winter Park on April 29.

The American Federation Pueri Cantores has its roots in France, where Father Fernand Mailet began bringing *Les Petits Chanteurs à la Croix de Bois* (The Little Singers of the Wooden Cross) to various towns around 1917.

Other nations began growing their own youth choirs, and in 1947 Father Mailet formed the federation known as Pueri Cantores. There are now 37 national federations.

Jan Schmidt, executive director of the American federation, spelled out the group’s goals:

- To evangelize students through music.
- To broaden the academic base of sacred music teaching in Catholic

schools. “You have to teach it from a historical standpoint,” Schmidt said. “You don’t just teach one style since 2000.”

• To create leadership among Catholic youths. “Many young choir members end up leading in the Church,” Schmidt said. “They’ve been conditioned to it.”

The American federation, based in Orange, Calif., was launched in 1953, but it took a sharp downturn after Vatican II, caused by changing musical tastes and relaxed worship guidelines.

“Music swung very much toward the casual,” Schmidt said. The federation only started to recover about a dozen years ago, she said. Now the organization aims to get about 10,000 singers involved, or 1 percent of the 1 million students in Catholic middle and high schools. And the Miami archdiocese has the potential to become one of the largest groups, Schmidt added.

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